MILLS & BOON

Prince Charming's Child

Jennifer Greene

Vintage 90s

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Prince Charming's Child

Аннотация

MEN of the YEAR MAN of the MONTH"I am a man of honor. If she's carrying my child, she will be my wife! - Mitch Landers, the Prince Charming no woman could forget It wasn't the flu. Nicole was pregnant. And darned if she could remember sleeping with a man in the past four years. Not unless she and co-worker Mitch had actually… ?Well, they had, and now her very own Sir Galahad was before her on bended knee. His proposal was duty-bound, although real passion sparked in Mitch's glance… and touch. Could a marriage forged for baby's sake end in a legend-worthy love for Sleeping Beauty and her dream prince?Some men are made for lovin' - and you'll love our MAN OF THE MONTH!

Like Sleeping Beauty, he'd wakened her from a sound sleep the night their child was conceived. Letter to Reader Title Page About the Author Dedication Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Copyright

Like Sleeping Beauty, he'd wakened her from a sound sleep the night their child was conceived.

Only, instead of a happily-ever-after, he'd aroused her awareness of all the things in her life that were missing.

Nicole was terribly afraid that she'd fallen in love with him. He wasn't the man she'd worked with all these months. He was someone else. He was a mysterious, compelling lover who invoked incredibly strange and powerful feelings when he kissed her. He made her feel safe and frightened at the same time. Somehow he'd gotten her talking as if they were going to be parenting the baby together. Somehow it didn't seem that hard to imagine herself married to Mitch, waking up to him every morning, sharing their baby's life, sharing their own life when the lights went off every night.

That's how the damn man made her feel. Like those things were possible....

HAPPILY EVER AFTER:

Your favorite fairy tales freshly told, with

all the passion you've ever craved.

Dear Reader.

The joys of summer are upon us—along with some July fireworks from Silhouette Desire!

The always wonderful Jennifer Greene presents our July MAN OF THE MONTH in Prince Charming's Child. A contemporary romance version of Sleeping Beauty this title also launches the author's new miniseries, HAPPILY EVER AFTER, inspired by those magical fairy tales we loved in childhood. And ever-talented Anne Marie Winston is back with a highly emotional reunion romance in Lovers' Reunion. The popular miniseries TEXAS BRIDES by Peggy Moreland continues with the provocative story of That McCloud Woman. Sheiks abound in Judith McWilliams's The Sheik's Secret, while a plain Jane is wooed by a millionaire in Jan Hudson's Plain Jane's Texan. And Barbara McCauley's new dramatic miniseries, SECRETS!, debuts this month with Blackhawk's Sweet Revenge.

We've got more excitement for you next month—watch for the premiere of the compelling new Desire miniseries THE TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB. Some of the sexiest, most powerful men in the Lone Star State are members of this prestigious club, and they all find love when they least expect it! You'll learn more about THE TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB in our August Dear Reader letter, along with an update on Silhouette's new continuity, THE FORTUNES OF TEXAS, debuting next month.

And this month, join in the celebrations by treating yourself to all six passionate Silhouette Desire titles.

Enjoy!

Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire
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JENNIFER GREENE

sold her first book in 1980, and has written more than fifty category romances. She has worked as a teacher, counselor and personnel manager, and has a degree from Michigan State in English and psychology. She lives near Lake Michigan with her husband, two children and their two-hundred-pound Newfoundland Moose.

Known for her warm, sensitive characters, Jennifer has won numerous awards, including the RWA Silver Medallion in 1984 and Lifetime and Career Achievement Awards from Romantic

Tunes Magazine. In 1998 she entered the RWA Hall of Fame after winning her third RITA.

To my readers,

As a girl, I inhaled every fairy tale I could get my hands on, but I became exasperated with them when I grew up. The romantic nature of the stories is wonderful, but the woman was always sitting back, counting on the guy to rescue her, rarely lifting a finger to help herself—nothing I can imagine today's woman would tolerate.

This story is the start of the HAPPILY EVER AFTER trilogy for Silhouette Desire...but each romance has a "today's woman" twist on the old fairy-tale fantasies. Sleeping Beauty was always one of my favorites, but in this tale, when my hero wakes up Sleeping Beauty, is he ever sorry. My prince opens a Pandora's box of trouble, for her and him both. If he thought he was going to win a happily-ever-after that easily, my heroine's about to teach him otherwise.

I hope you enjoy Prince Charming's Child, and the next two to come!

One

Since Nicole hadn't been near a man's bed in four years, she chuckled when she heard the results of the pregnancy test.

"I'm sure someone'll be happy to hear that, but it can't be me. Trust me—you're either looking at another patient's file or the test results are wrong."

Conceivably the nurse practitioner had heard words of denial from her patients before, because her prompt answer sounded prepared. "There's always a margin for error with the tests, but that's why we back them up with a physical. You're about two and a half months along, Ms. Stewart, and I can see that you obviously weren't expecting this pregnancy. If you need to talk to someone about your options—"

Nicole's smile disappeared faster than smoke when she realized the nurse was serious. "I'm thirty-two, not some irresponsible sixteen-year-old. I know what my options are—and my responsibilities. You don't understand. This isn't a matter of being surprised by an unexpected pregnancy. It's that I can't be pregnant at all. I haven't been with anyone."

"Well, miracles do happen, but I've never heard of one on this subject The last I knew, it always takes two to tango."

Nicole understood the woman's wry teasing was an effort to help her relax, but this was no humorous matter. Not to her. "I realize you think I'm joking, but I swear I'm not. I haven't tangoed with anyone! The tests simply have to be wrong. I only

came in because I thought I had the flu, for Pete's sake."

The nurse practitioner patiently spent another fifteen minutes with her. It didn't help. Nicole left the women's clinic feeling shell-shocked, carrying prescriptions for vitamins and morning sickness, her mind buzzing with information on the symptoms she could expect for the next six and a half months.

Pregnant. The word kept reeling through her mind as she pushed open the door. Outside, a blustery damp wind tore straight through her ivory silk blouse and clawed at her auburn hair. She should have known better than to leave her suit jacket at the office. Two hours before, the day had been balmy warm, but weather on the Oregon coast was typically capricious—if not downright mean—in early March.

Hurrying to her white Taurus, she climbed inside, but her fingers were so shaky she could hardly fit in the ignition key, much less punch the buttons for the heater. This was just so crazy! If she were almost three months pregnant right now, that meant the baby had to be conceived around the Christmas holidays.

And that was impossible. Not a little impossible. 100% impossible.

She swung onto the coastal highway and leveled her foot on the accelerator. Work By Design, her business, was only a ten-minute drive from the women's clinic, ample time for the last few years to flash in front of her eyes.

Long ago she'd discovered a talent for design, but there was

a crowded abundance of competition in the interior decorating field. The psychology of work environments was new then. Employers were just catching on that an ergonomic, efficient office space could provably increase worker productivity and job satisfaction. She'd seen the niche. More relevant for her personally, she'd needed to do something that made a positive difference in others' lives. She did the artsy stuff from the start, but it took finding the right engineer and architect to really make Work By Design come together. After four years—and her specifically devoting sixteen-hour days—the business was not only cooking, but bubbling over with potential growth now.

Through these years, though, there had never been a spare second to think of babies or a private life. If the right man had popped into her life, who knew, maybe she'd have rethought having a baby. But that was precisely the point. There'd been no right men, no wrong men, no any men.

Nicole had never exactly planned to turn into a celibate saint, but there were darn good reasons why she'd chosen the life-style of a workaholic hermit.

Her stomach suddenly clenched with nerves. Old nerves. Old, scary, ghost-nerves that hadn't peeked out of her emotional closet in years. She'd grown up taking every wrong road there was to take. She'd known trouble from the inside out. Cripes, she'd been trouble from the inside out. But a cop named Sam had helped her around seventeen years ago. She'd started a new life in a new place and done her best not to look back.

She was ashamed of where she'd been—but, finally, proud of the woman she was becoming. There'd been no irresponsible, impulsive mistakes. None. Not even little ones. She'd turned herself into a completely different kind of woman than the hellion teenager she'd been growing up as.

Or so she'd believed. Until the pregnancy test this afternoon had turned out positive.

Minutes later, she parked in front of the stone-and-glass office building and barreled inside, away from the devil wind, hiking past John. Mitch. Wilma. Rafe.

Her office was at the far end, a sanctuary with blue silk walls and thick, silencing carpet and windows that overlooked a cliff edge view of the Pacific. Waves thundered and pounded the rocks below, looking wild and lonely. Exactly how she felt. With her pulse racing faster than a frantic battery, she plunked down in the chair behind her gleaming pecan desk and squeezed her eyes closed.

The faces of her staff again chased through her mind. John, Mitch, Wilma, Rafe. And yes, of course she remembered holding an office party two days before Christmas last year. It was the only social event she'd been remotely part of in a blue moon.

And long before today, she'd realized that parts of that evening were hazy in her memory—but that never seemed remotely strange, simply because she'd been so dead tired that night. She'd hosted the party at her house for a number of reasons. She wanted the staff to indulge in all the champagne they wanted, and at

home, she had spare rooms for anyone to sleep over so no one had to worry about drinking and driving. There'd been so much to organize and plan. She'd had lobsters brought in, oysters on the half shell, chocolate-covered strawberries—every luxury she could think of, because her team had an unbeatably successful year and deserved being spoiled.

Nicole suddenly rubbed two fingers on her temples. The staff had had a blast, which was exactly what she'd wanted to happen—she recalled moments from the party with crystal clarity. But until now, she'd forgotten how they'd teased her about not drinking. They were always ribbing her about being too formal, never letting down her hair and loosening up.

It was never a good idea to let down her hair. Ever. She had too much past history she wanted buried good and deep. The staff respected her, and she'd done her absolutely damnedest to earn that respect. Besides that, she couldn't handle liquor—which heaven knew she'd learned the hard way years before.

But Nicole suddenly remembered a glass of champagne being thrust in her hands that night. At least one glass. Possibly two.

Holy cripes, could she have had three?

Because suddenly she realized that was precisely the part of the evening when her memory turned as murky as an ocean cave. That hadn't mattered before. But unless she'd become pregnant via immaculate conception—which unfortunately was a stretch, even for a woman who made a living on her creative imagination—suddenly the part of the evening she didn't remember mattered

a whole bunch.

Restlessly she swung out of the desk and paced to the open door. Each employee had an individual office, but the central area was organized with tables and drafting boards and a video setup. Developing models and layups took space, and often the staff worked together on projects.

John was sprawled with his feet on a table, working with a sketch pad on his lap. From the doorway, she could see the smooth dome of his head, his Mickey Mouse tie, the concentration furrow in the middle of his brow. John handled the advertising and marketing. He was forty-two and growing a little couch-potato pooch and wonderful at his job. When his wife left him the year before, Nicole had been afraid he'd never climb back from a pit-awful depression. She thought the absolute world of John, and if he really needed something, she knew she'd go the long mile to come through for him—but John was like a brother, as comfortable to be with as an old shoe. Even if she'd guzzled an entire winery worth of champagne, she simply could not imagine getting naked with him.

Rafe ambled by, carrying a fresh mug of coffee, and plunked down in front of a drafting board. Rafe was thirty-four, single like John, and originally Nicole almost hadn't hired him. He had the exact engineering background she was looking for, but between the dark hair, dark eyes, and husky muscular build, he was a cut-and-dried hunk. She'd worried those good looks could be asking for trouble—but she'd been wrong. Rafe could get impatient and

tempermental with the rest of the staff, but he was smart and ambitious and unbeatably capable at his job.

Nicole's gaze lasered on his back for a second longer. Yeah, he was an eyeful. And anyone's deprived hormones could be stirred up with alcohol. But unlike the rest of the team, Rafe never talked about his private life—he'd openly admitted losing a job before because of mixing business and pleasure, and he felt adamant about never making that mistake again. He'd never told her an off-color joke, never looked at her sideways. Even if he were attracted, she couldn't imagine him initiating a pass. It was just impossible. It could never have happened.

Wilma streaked past, shuffling a sheath of papers, pausing only long enough to bounce a kiss on John's balding crown. Wilma was twenty-eight, a brown-eyed brunette with a centerfold figure and the nature of an incurable flirt. She was openly affectionate with all the guys. Discussing the antics of her exuberant love life was a ritual over morning coffee. The boys inhaled every wild detail. Nicole had never tried to rein her in. Wilma managed the office and bookkeeping side of things and kept the whole place pumping.

And that left Mitch...the only staff member who Nicole couldn't see from the doorway, but she could hear him yell something to Rate with that distinctly whiskey baritone. Mitch was thirty-two, her own age. The guys called him "Stretch" because he was a lanky six feet three inches, with hair the color of sun-bleached sand and eyes bluer than sky. Sexy enough, if a

woman's taste ran to overtall bean-poles—which Nicole's never personally had.

Mitch was the newest team member, she'd only hired him six months ago. Originally Janice had been the group's architect, and she'd done so well that her leaving for a job in New York had left a precarious hole. Nicole expected the employee search to be worrisome, and instead had a plum drop in her lap. Mitch's background surpassed even what Janice had offered them.

Ironically, he'd rubbed Nicole personally wrong from the beginning, and she admitted it. Heck, so did he—they even joked about it together sometimes. The dam man had a gift for getting along with everyone. He was in his element with the men's men contractor types, yet he never lost patience with the creative design types on the team. From the start, he'd leaped into touchy situations that had everyone else running for cover. The whole team loved him. Objectively, so did she—there was simply no explaining why they scraped against each other's nerves. Nicole had quit fretting the why of it. She just gave Mitch an extra wide berth and let him do his job. Everyone was critical in a small business this size, but Mitch was damn near irreplaceable.

Even if he weren't irreplaceable—even if there wasn't that strange prickly edginess between them—there was another reason why Nicole would never touch a hair on his head. More than once, he'd mentioned a woman friend. A solid woman friend. Nicole had forgotten her name—Susan, maybe? Regardless, he was already involved. Nicole couldn't imagine

any circumstance in the universe where she'd poach on another woman's territory—which meant there was zero possibility of her sleeping with Mitch.

Abruptly she pressed a protective hand on her abdomen. Her stomach was increasingly queasy, her heart starting to gallop with anxiety. She simply had to try and calm down. It's not like all this thinking was getting her anywhere.

Every mental road led her to the same place. The only men in her life were the guys in the office. There was no occasion anything could have happened except the night of that Christmas party. But party or no party, champagne or no champagne, she simply would never have let anything happen with any of her guys. It went against her whole moral and character grain. And a woman didn't forget making love with a man, for heaven's sake. And surely the man would have said something if anything like that had occurred. And she'd wakened the morning after the party in her own bed, alone.

Nicole kept trying to add two and two, but the sum just refused to be four.

She couldn't be pregnant.

Yet she was.

"Nicole? You have a free minute?"

Mitch Landers had been waiting all afternoon for a chance to catch the boss in and alone. The envelope in his hand contained a letter of resignation. He had no illusions this was going to be an easy conversation, but he'd postponed it for days. He needed

a moment when the rest of the team were solidly occupied and the phone wasn't ringing and there was a chance of him catching some uninterrupted time with her. A quarter to five seemed his best shot. And Mitch had quit kidding himself that this didn't have to be done.

That was the plan. But she was standing at the window when he knocked, and the instant she heard his voice, she promptly spun around. And he saw her face. "Sure, come on in. What's the problem? The Llewellyn account?"

"No, nothing like that. I just need to talk to you about something, but...look, are you feeling okay?"

She produced an instant smile, but it was as fake as a politican's promises. "To tell you the truth, I've had better afternoons, but I'm fine, really, just a little distracted. Sit down, tell me what the problem is."

One look at her face, and Mitch knew his plan was going to hell in a handbasket. But he sat in one of her prissy blue office chairs and stretched out his long, lanky legs. Everything about her office always made him feel like an ox in a boudoir. Restlessly he batted the envelope on his knee, then just as restlessly pocketed it out of sight.

He couldn't tell whether his boss was sick, scared or somebody just killed her dog. But something was wrong. And for Nicole Stewart to look fragile as a cotton puff was so out of character that something had to be "bad" wrong.

It only took a second to catalog her features head to toe—

but at least this once, he had a judiciously altruistic motive. His pulse could rev from zero to sixty with a single glance at her, and had from the day they met. On the surface, nothing looked particularly different. Her silky cream blouse and mannish green suit were pretty typical office attire. Not much figure. On a scale of one to ten, the legs got a ten-plus, but the rest of the package maxed out at three. No boobs. No hips. She was built long on angles and short on curves...but the way she moved those angles had inspired his hormones to great feats of imagination from the beginning—and would now, if the look on her face wasn't worrying him.

Her face had always been the killer. It started with a frame of vibrant auburn hair, chopped off at chin length with spiky bangs. He'd never seen it longer. About every four weeks, she zealously hit a stylist to ruthlessly tame the mop into a nice, sedate, businesswoman's haircut. Waste of money, Mitch thought personally. Maybe you could beat the wicked out of a sinner, but nobody was gonna tame that thick, curly hair. It bounced around an oval face with all kinds of interesting lines. Sharp little nose. Chin with character. A slash of delicate cheekbones. A too-wide mouth that showed off gorgeous white teeth when she laughed, and could prim up into a straight line when she was serious—which was way too much of the time, as far as Mitch was concerned. But either way, the shape of those soft lips was always going to make a man wonder how she kissed.

Normally when he looked at her face, the way she moved, he

saw sass. Spirit. Don't-mess-with-me-buster character. Maybe she was a five-foot-five-inch welterweight, but he'd bet on her over a bruiser in a dark alley any day. She was a dirty infighter, something he'd always admired in a woman. Her loyalty to the staff was legend. She always stepped in front of staff if there was an aggravating client or a touchy problem, always taking the heat, charging in whenever she smelled trouble. Sometimes too much so. When Nik was on a full-speed charge, she had a tough time backing down. She'd probably take on Goliath—and God knew, lose—but Mitch didn't doubt Goliath would suffer mightily first. Not from a punch. The blue silk walls in her office were a measure of her pure-female methods. She fought strictly girl fashion, almost never swore, rarely raised her voice—but if a guy crossed her, she went straight for the balls.

As far as Mitch had ever seen, she feared nothing. Which had always concerned and fascinated him both—he didn't know her background, because she didn't talk. Not to staff. Not about personal things. But she had to learn to fight that way somewhere. She had guts, will, strength.

But dammit, not today. She was shook up about something. The only real splash of color in that face were her eyes. They were blue-gray, almond shape, too big for that small face. Normal women tattletaled every emotion they were feeling in their eyes. Not her. Her expression just went flat when she was blocking something, and she was good at blocking any damn thing she wanted to. That those eyes revealed panic and vulnerability at

the moment made Mitch inclined to call 911 and not waste time hearing the explanation.

"You said you wanted to talk about something," she prompted him again.

"Yeah, but it'll wait. Look, you're real pale. You sure you're okay? Did something happen this afternoon?"

"Yes. No. I...oh, God." She sank in the office chair behind her desk, and produced another light smile as if to reassure him—but that smile was as weak as watered-down scotch. "I'm fine. It's not your problem, Mitch. This just probably isn't a real good time to talk business, if it's something that'll wait until morning."

He heard voices chattering from the outer office, drawers slamming, Wilma's throaty laughter. The staff was leaving for the day. So could he. She was obviously asking to be left alone. Only she really looked like a puff of wind could keel her over—and if he left, there'd be nobody in the office to even know she was in trouble.

"I take it whatever happened was personal, not business."

"Yes. Which is exactly what I meant—it's not your worry."

"And you were gone for a couple hours this afternoon." Wheels start clicking in his head. "You had a doc or dentist appointment? Heard some upsetting health news? Or something in a different direction, like your place was vandalized, or something happened to someone in your family—?"

"Good grief. I didn't meant to give you the impression there was anything so dire. I was gone for a doctor's appointment, that's

all. I'm fine, I'm telling you—or will be by tomorrow. It's just right at this minute, I admit I'm not at my best—"

He received the m.y.o.b. message loud and clear. But her hands were shaky, her voice warbly and that priceless skin was too damn ghostly white. His boss wasn't always cool in a crisis, but he'd never seen her near shambles. "So what'd the doc say to upset you?"

"Mitch. This just isn't an appropriate conversation. There is absolutely nothing that should worry you or any of the team. Or the business."

"Screw the business. We talking tumor, heart, cancer—?"

"Holy spit. Nothing like that." As if his rapid-fire questions had finally nagged her over the edge, she blurted out, "I'm pregnant."

Pregnant.

He couldn't be the first man who'd been stunned silent by that particular word, but these circumstances were a tad unusual. His heart quit beating altogether, then seemed to change its mind and start slamming nonstop at a racehorse pace. He wasn't positive he could budge from that blue silk chair if there'd been a fire.

"Damnation, Landers. I never meant to tell you that." Nicole never used his last name unless she was ticked off with him—which, come to think of it, happened a couple times a week. But not for something like this. She pushed a hand through her hair in a gesture of impatience. "Since I opened my big mouth, I'm afraid I'm stuck saying a little more. First, I'd appreciate your not

saying anything to the rest of the staff. It isn't a matter of keeping a secret. The pregnancy will be obvious before long. But I just found this out, and I'd like some time to think about what I'm going to do and how I'm going to tell other people before being put on the spot."

"Don't be silly. You tell me a confidence, I'd take it to the grave." He wanted to say something more, but there seemed to be a lump in his throat about the size of Alaska. Not to mention that his heart was pounding so loud in his ears that he could barely think.

She pushed out of her chair again. Up down, up down, like a yo-yo. But he understood. When anxiety was chasing your tail, the inclination was to try and outrun it by staying in motion. She paced over to the window and stared down at the pounding surf below, then yanked the shades to block the view. "I'm afraid there's a little more to this. In this day and age, there's nothing that odd about a thirty-two-year-old woman choosing to have a baby without a husband in sight. I mean, a woman can choose the best time for her in terms of biology and health. There's no stigma about being a single parent anymore. And If I could just sell that story to the staff, I don't think anyone would blink twice. Unfortunately, there's no possibility of my selling that fib. Because of the circumstances, the real truth is going to come out whether I want it to or not."

"You're saying there's some complication...like you don't want the baby?"

“Oh, I want the baby.” Instinctively she pressed a hand on her heart. “I didn’t plan for this right now, and for sure I haven’t had two seconds to make plans about how I’m going to cope. But the baby...I’ll find a way. Whatever I have to do. It wasn’t really finding out I was pregnant that threw me into shock. It was the shame.”

“Shame?”

Again she sighed. Again she raked a hand through her hair, paced away from the window, and leaned back against her tall pecan credenza. “Mitch, I shouldn’t be telling you any of this.”

He knew. She never admitted any private problem to the staff. She had an unbending code about what bosses should and shouldn’t do around employees—and that had always applied doublefold to him. The lump in his throat seemed to be growing to the size of the Northwest Territories. She wasn’t talking by choice, but because she was too shook up to hold it in. “Just spill the rest of it. You’ve gone this far. Get the rest off your chest.”

She whispered, “I don’t know who the father is. How could there be a worse shame than that? And that isn’t even the worst of it.”

Through a mouth dryer than an abandoned well, Mitch said, “So, okay. Let’s hear the worst.”

She gestured wildly with her hands. “I don’t remember. Sleeping with anyone. It’s been years since I was involved—the business took so much time to build up. I just didn’t go out. And there were other reasons that I never...” She clipped off that

thought, and zoomed in another direction. “The thing is, it had to have happened the night of the Christmas party. There was no other possible time.”

“The Christmas party,” he echoed.

She seemed to assume something from his change in expression, because she swiftly nodded. “Yes. I know. That means it was someone here. One of the team. That’s what I meant about not being able to lie—someone here unquestionably knows the truth. And on top of everything else, that it could be one of our team makes me guilty of sexual harassment—”

“What?” Hell, the woman kept lobbing grenades at him. He couldn’t keep track what direction she was going to come from next.

“Come on, Mitch. I’m the employer. That puts me in a power position in terms of the law—and that really kills me, because I thought I was always so careful about that. But what it means is that I put one of the guys in a terrible position. Everything’s my fault. I had no right...”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute—” The lump in his throat had grown to the size of a couple of continents now, but he had to get past it. She was beating herself up right and left.

But he couldn’t get a word in. She was way too wound up to even acknowledge the interruption. “...and not being able to remember makes it so unforgivable. The problem was the champagne—and I don’t mean that like an excuse. There is no excuse for drinking when I know it goes straight to my head. But

the champagne apparently fogged my memory. And that's one of the critical things I just don't know how to deal with—coming to work, facing you all, what I should say about the pregnancy when someone here obviously knows what happened. You're going to laugh, but I thought it might be you. For two seconds."

"Me?"

"I know. Really impossible." She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, at least for that second showing an honest spark of humor. "You and I rub against each other like a snake and a mongoose. Maybe that's why I suddenly spilled all this—not that I meant to vent on you, Mitch—but because I was so sure you have no interest in me that way. And that's one of the things that's confused me. Why the man never said anything. And no one has. All I can think is that he must really have felt put on the spot and regret that night really badly—"

"Hey, I don't think you should just assume that. There could be all kinds of reasons why he kept quiet."

"Well, whatever the reasons, I have to figure out who it is." She was back to pacing again, hips swinging, hands in constant motion. "First I thought...John. Like out of kindness, because he's still having a rough time getting on his feet after that divorce. Maybe he turned to me and I just couldn't see a way to say no? Because of not wanting to be another woman who crushed his ego? But I've thought and thought about that, and the truth is, I keep trying, but I just can't imagine kissing him, much less—"

The lump dissolved. He found his voice. "Hey, you don't need

to be thinking about John that way. In fact, forget John. Nicole—"

"Well, I could forget John, but that leaves Rafe. Only Mitch, he's made such a point of never talking about his personal life. You know how Wilma flirts. He never bites. He's just violent on not combining business with his private life, so if something happened with him, it's really the worse kind of harassment. He could have been put in a position where he didn't feel he could say no because of his job. But he is an attractive man. It's not like I can't imagine any circumstance where—"

"Forget Rafe. Forget imagining him that way, too. Nicole—"

"There's no point in my considering Wilma, because she couldn't have gotten me pregnant," she said with another dry attempt at humor. "I have to know who it is. And it's so frustrating that I can't remember. Somehow I have to make this right for the man involved, but I don't even know how to start. I'm just so ashamed and disgusted with myself that I could have put someone in this position. I care about all of you. This is just so wrong. Wrong of me—"

"Nicole," Mitch said for the third time—this time loud enough to wake the dead, which was what it seemed to take to catch her attention.

"What?"

"You can quit thinking about the other guys in that context. It wasn't any of them. It was me. I'm the father of your baby."

Two

“Oh, no! You couldn’t be the father, Mitch! You just couldn’t be!”

Mitch didn’t wince, but he wanted to. Although Nik might not appreciate it, his mind was racing from shock, no different than hers. Obviously he was aware they’d taken a risk the night they made love, but there’d been no tip that night had repercussions until this instant. That she seemed stunned at his admitting paternity was bad enough, but she also threw herself in her office chair as if she lacked the strength to face such appalling news.

At thirty-two, naturally Mitch had taken a few slices in his masculine ego—but nothing that knifed his male esteem quite so fast or lethally.

Way, way back—in the era before Nicole had upended his entire life—he vaguely remembered a pleasant historical time when women actually liked him. One even told him he was a creatively inspired lover. Several had chased him downright ruthlessly. Amazing as it seemed now, he’d never had a complaint about his prowess or talent between the sheets. Until Nik, no woman had ever felt obligated to completely block all memory of sleeping with him. And until now, he’d never taken up with a woman who looked aghast at the idea of him in her bed.

Any second now, Mitch figured the letter of resignation burning a hole in his pocket would strike his sense of irony. Quitting was obviously out of the question now. A baby in the picture changed everything.

Only it was hard to imagine how an impossible situation

could possibly have become even more disastrous. Mitch had learned the hard, bloody way that he had a problem with tenacity. Sensible people turned off when they saw a dead-end road sign. Not him. If there was something he wanted or valued, he stubbornly persisted in charging forward long past the hopeless point. He hated giving up on anything. But this afternoon, he thought he'd finally gotten smarter and was doing the rational, practical thing by resigning. Getting out of her life. Removing himself from the hopeless temptation of Nicole altogether.

Only this afternoon wasn't going precisely like he planned. Under any other circumstances, that would have been great news. He never wanted to get out of her life. He never wanted to quit a job he loved. Hell, as soon as he recovered from the life-threatening shock that he'd fathered a child, he was likely gonna spin high on the baby news, too. Unfortunately, one teensy small detail hadn't changed from the original core problem.

Nicole still couldn't see him for dust.

And she was still facing him with that aghast expression.

"Mitch...it just couldn't have been you. The two of us just couldn't have slept together. I mean, for one thing, I know there's already a woman in your life, a Suzanne or Susan or something—"

Bewilderment furrowed his brow. For a moment he was completely confounded how Suz could have possibly entered this conversation—but that didn't stop him from immediately correcting her misconception. "Whoa—there's no one in my life.

Nor would anything have happened between us if someone else had been in the wings. If I'm involved, I believe in doing the loyal-as-a-hound routine. No exceptions. I can't imagine how you even heard Suz's name?"

"From Wilma. I'm positive she said—"

Aw, hell. Finally it clicked how she'd made the association. "Yeah, well...before I moved and took the job here, there was a Suz. And when I was first hired on, Wilma came on pretty strong. I didn't know then that flirting was a life-style with her. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, and didn't want to start a new job with an awkward situation, so I made some comment about there being a Suz in my life. Good grief, I never even thought about it again. It was just a chance comment at the time. It never occurred to me that she'd spread the word or that anyone else had made anything of it."

That didn't stop her from sputtering. "But Mitch, it still couldn't have been you."

A billion women on the planet, and he had to fall for the one who used his masculine ego for machete practice? "Trust me. It was."

"But I always thought you didn't even like me—"

"Um, Nik, that's not remotely true."

Instead of that comment reassuring her, it seemed to cause more mental wheels to spin in her mind. She seemed to sink even deeper in that office chair. A flush of guilt splashed her cheeks with color. "Oh, God. Look, I have to face this, so I just you want

you to be honest with me. What did I do? Throw myself at you at that party? Put you in a position where you couldn't say no because I was the boss?"

"Nicole, that's not at all how it happened."

"Then how did it happen? And why didn't you ever say anything to me long before this?"

Mitch rubbed an exasperated hand at the back of his neck. For almost three months, he'd have given gold for those questions to come up. He'd had to battle every grain in his character to shut up, when his nature was to charge into a problem and confront it head-on. It was only for her sake—ever—that he'd been silent.

Now, though, blurting out the plain truth wasn't that simple. He was painfully conscious that how he handled the situation could either open doors—for her, for him, for the two of them—or permanently close them. Somehow, he had to buy himself some thinking time.

Slowly he stood up. "I'm not ducking those questions, Nik—I want to answer them. But it's after hours. You look beat. And I don't think the office is the best place to discuss this. I'm guessing you'd like to go home, put your feet up, get a chance to catch your breath. How about if I pick up some Chinese—or whatever you feel like for dinner—and we meet up at your place?"

"I don't know..." She started shaking her head.

"I understand—you just had all this sprung on you. And I don't want you to feel put on the spot. About anything. But before you start making plans about the baby, I think you need to know what

happened that night. I'm part of this, too...and it doesn't matter to me whether we talk at my place or yours, but I assume you'd be more comfortable on your turf."

She agreed—not, Mitch suspected, because she willingly wanted more time with him, but because she really, really wanted to know what happened that night. After that, they both went in motion. She locked the office; he called ahead to order dinner, and they separated in the parking lot. A half hour later, he'd picked up the Chinese takeout and was swinging his red Miata into her drive.

Juggling the overfull bag of Chinese food cartons, he climbed out of the car and hip-slammed the door with his gaze riveted on her house. He'd only seen it once—the night of the Christmas party. And one look was all it took for him to recall that night in Technicolor and surround-sound detail... but remembering his redhead naked and her warm, willing body and those lethally vulnerable eyes of hers was trouble. At the time, he thought he was waking up Sleeping Beauty. In fact, he could have sworn that was exactly what happened...except that the princess failing to remember a damn thing had totally screwed up the end on the fairy tale.

But the question was what to do now. He stood a moment longer, studying her place, willing answers about Nicole to come to him from her choice of home.

Nik picked up clients from the spray of Oregon tourist towns up and down the coast—Florence and Newport and Reedsport

—but her property was between those splashes of civilization, off the beaten path. Once upon a time, it had probably been someone's summer beach house. The outside was ramshackle, but ramshackle with character. The house was two sturdy stories, with clapboard siding that showed off years of weathering winds. A wraparound porch circled the bottom story, where balconies jutted off bedrooms on the second floor. The yard was an overgrown garden of willowy ornamental grasses like sea oats and sweet grass, a shade spot created by a gnarled old cypress tree. The steps leading down to the bluff edge of the sea were beat-up boards.

Maybe an artist had built the place, because it had that bohemian I - don't - give - a - damn - what - anyone - else - thinks kind of character. And the first time Mitch saw it, he'd fallen in love. It seemed so right for Nik. The house capsulized the secret romantic and wild free spirit he'd always sensed in her.

In the office, she was so contained. Right from the start, her quicksilver mind had ransomed his heart, but she was a different woman at work, always worrying about doing the right thing, behaving the right way with the team. There was no reason she couldn't laugh and loosen up—except in her own mind—but from the day he met her, he wondered where she'd learned all that control, what life lessons had taught her all that worry. He'd seen loneliness in her eyes. He'd seen her start to laugh, then cut it off. He'd seen her passionate zest for life a million times when she was brainstorming ideas, but that exuberance got clipped with

ruthless scissors around people. Her choice of house reflected both the mystery and challenge that Mitch had always seen in Nik. There was a warm, sensual life-lover under the surface—if the right lover could just coax her to set it free.

Once upon a time, he'd even been arrogant enough to think that lover could be him.

The screen door suddenly clapped open. "Mitch? I thought I heard your car. Come on in."

He didn't want to go in. Given a choice, what he really wanted to do was drop the food, grab her, and try kissing her senseless. Just looking at her had always made his hormones stand up and bay like a mournful, lonesome hound, and right now she was damn well breathtaking. A west wind had scuttled away the afternoon's blustery clouds, and the evening was turning clear as glass. Her hair caught the sunset flame, made her skin glow with a sensual, soft, pearl luminescence.

Still, he cut the juice on the electric charge in his pulse. Kissing her senseless might be an inspiring idea but could too easily end up a disastrous one. And as he hiked toward the house, he discovered they had a new and interesting problem. "You'd better be hungry. I brought enough Chinese to feed a platoon."

"I can see that," she said wryly. Swiftly she took the food cartons when he stepped in, but her eyes flashed on his face and then skittered away. Nik wasn't a skitterer. She'd take on a tiger and not look back for something she wanted to win. So, he mused, she'd done some thinking. And maybe she didn't

remember that night, but it was pretty obvious she was suddenly aware of him in a whole different way. He'd metamorphosed from a nice, safe, tame employee into an unknown quantity of lover.

He liked those nerves. It evened things up. He'd suffered sexual tension all these months alone, when God knew he was more than willing to share. Of course, unanswered questions suddenly hung in the air between them like grenades, but Mitch figured one thing at a time. "If you tell me where the plates are, I'll help put the dinner on," he offered.

"You don't have to help. It won't take me a second. Can I get you a drink first?"

"Yeah, water—which I'll get for myself. I didn't suggest dinner so you could wait on me, Nik. The idea was to give you a chance to relax."

That plan worked on a par with peace talks in the Middle East. They settled in her blue-tiled kitchen. He watched her poke at her egg roll, fork down a little sweet and sour shrimp, sample some of the war sui gui. Mostly she gulped water and charged down conversational roads like religion and politics—gutsy stuff to argue about, but nothing remotely related to anything on either of their minds.

Mitch didn't mind her stalling; he thought she needed the unwind time. But typically Nik never cut herself any slack, and as if she realized how long she'd been chitchatting, she suddenly set down her fork. "We're not getting it done," she said impatiently.

"Getting what done?"

"Both of us are avoiding the subject of babies like it'd bite us. And it's my fault. It's not that I don't want to talk about it. I do. But somehow I can't figure out what to say, how to start..."

"There's nothing to be blaming yourself for. You're uncomfortable with me—"

"No, of course not. We've worked together for months, for heaven's sakes. Even when we don't see eye to eye, we trade insults and bicker like old friends. We've never really had a problem talking together."

But there was a difference, Mitch thought, and that difference was her thinking of him as a lover instead of an employee. He pushed back his chair. "Look, how about if we try getting out of the house, take a walk on the beach?"

Her eyes immediately brightened. "Yeah. Fresh air sounds good." But then she glanced down at her business suit.

"I'll do the dishes. That'll give you a chance to change into something warmer and more comfortable than work clothes."

"You don't have to do the dishes—"

"It's nothing, Nik. Go on."

She hesitated, but then said okay and disappeared upstairs to change. Mitch leveled the dishes in two minutes flat, then wandered into her living room. The night of the Christmas party, the inside of her house had fascinated him as much as the outside—but for entirely different reasons.

The open staircase led to three bedrooms and two baths on the

second story. Downstairs, the front door opened onto a massive living area with big bay windows overlooking the ocean bluff. The blue-tiled kitchen was chunked down in the middle, leading down two steps to a dining and sunroom that both faced east. Tucked on like an afterthought was a small wing that contained an office study and bathroom.

The layout was fine—it was the decor that confounded Mitch. At work, he and Nik were a natural team. With his architectural background, he was at home with beams and studs, where she was the pro at color and style and all that female stuff. Hell, she'd built up a thriving business from scratch because her perception was so sharp. Meet a client and right off she tuned into the individual's personality and all the internal decor ingredients that worked for that person. Get her going on the Feng Shui concepts about balance and harmony and it was tough to shut her up.

Yet the decor in her own place was perplexingly horrible. He wandered around, hands in his pockets, just looking. She'd obviously put time and money into it, but the decorating style was stark minimalist—unrelenting neutrals, taupe carpet, taupe couches, taupe walls. A pale oak table displayed coffee-table art books. Appropriate, pricey pictures hung on the walls. Nobody could criticize a single furnishing. It was all textbook perfect. They'd had clients who'd probably orgasm to achieve the same look, but they weren't Nik. There were no splashes of colors, no hint of her vibrant creativity or independent spirit.

The living room—the whole inside decor—made him think

of a trapped soul. He saw that side of her at work, too. Nik was always proper, hyper about doing the right thing, no bending on standards. Gutsy in her business, but sleeping through life. Restlessly Mitch jingled the change in his pocket, thinking that if he hadn't glimpsed the other side of Nik, he'd never have this damn fool convoluted problem of being gut-deep in love with her.

But he bad. Memories stirred of another room in her house—the only room where she hadn't bleached out every stamp of her personality. Her bedroom. He remembered all of it. The thick, soft rose carpeting. The antique sleigh bed. The old-fashioned dressing table with a needlepoint seat, pearls dripping from a crystal bowl, vials of perfume and cosmetic pots and a cloisonné dish heaped with earrings.

The room reflected the Nik he'd always sensed under the surface, exuberantly female, a free-flow of rich textures and sensual colors. But it wasn't the furnishings in that bedroom that had kidnapped a niche on his soul the night of the Christmas party. It was Sleeping Beauty coming awake in his arms, coming alive, the rigidly careful Nik forgetting all that control in the dark...but abruptly Mitch heard footsteps.

He spun around to see Nicole bounding down the stairs, dressed in skinny jeans and old sneakers and a voluminous threadbare black sweatshirt.

"I'll be damned," he murmured. "Who'd have guessed you'd own anything with a frayed collar? I'm impressed."

“No teasing allowed. It’s a sacred sweatshirt,” she said dryly.

“I understand. I’ve got a sacred tee from college basketball days. When my dad got sick a few years ago, I showed up in the hospital wearing that tee. My mom was disgusted. I didn’t care. I wanted luck for my dad any way I could get it.”

A flash of a smile in her eyes, but then she cocked her head. “Your dad’s okay now?”

“Fit as a fiddle. You ready to head out?”

“I am...but I’m not sure this is such a great idea. You’re still stuck wearing your shoes from work. I’m afraid they’ll get wrecked on the beach. And it’s cold—I could loan you a jacket, but I can’t imagine having anything of mine that’d fit.”

Mitch figured it’d be an uphill job to teach her some selfishness. Typically she was worried about him—even under the circumstances—rather than thinking of herself. But she was also a good head shorter than his six-three. Imagining how he’d fit in anything of hers made him grin. “These loafers have seen sand before. And I’ve got a fleece jacket in the car I’ll grab when we go out.”

“Okay, then. Let’s hit it.”

Outside, the sky had darkened to a deep velvet-blue, the moon just rising to light their way. He fetched his fleece jacket and zipped up, feeling the sharp salt air suck in his lungs, fresh and invigorating. Pale stars illuminated their climb down to the beach from the board steps. The surf was sleepy at high tide. Foam sneaked up the sand, leaving a lacy collar of froth in its wake.

Common to this stretch of Oregon's coast, giant rocks jutted from the water, plunked down like mythical black sculptures of all shapes and sizes. In the darkness they looked like a giant's play toys.

He let Nicole set the walking pace, which naturally for her was a full-speed charge. They hiked in silence for a bit, both of them savoring the magic of the sea, the night, the fresh air. Striding next to her, he was conscious of his height and her smallness, conscious of how the worn jeans showed off her fanny and long slim legs, conscious that she stole looks at his face...and conscious that no matter how good walking with her felt, it wasn't getting their talking done.

"I moved here from Seattle," he said finally.

"I know. I remember from your job application. You were one of the architects for a firm named Strickland's."

"I was an architect there, yes. But what I didn't mention on the ap was that I owned the firm."

She tilted her face, her eyebrows arched in question. "Why didn't you say so at the time?"

"Because when I started job hunting—for the work I wanted—I got a steady round of turndowns. On paper, I looked overpriced and overqualified. I had no way to make anyone believe from a résumé that the work I was applying for was what I really wanted to do."

"Obviously there's more to that story," she prodded him.

"Yeah, there is." He picked up a flat stone, and tried skimming

it. Three hops before it sank. He was out of practice. “I come from a long line of overachievers. My dad, mom, two brothers—everyone’s good with money, carved out a successful place in the business world. My dad used to say I had the strongest bent for turning a dime into a dollar—which he was proud of me for. I started investing when I was 14, had enough of a nest-egg to buy Strickland’s when I was 24. Of course the business was facing a Chapter Eleven, so anyone could have picked it up for a lick and a song. I was just so young and dumb I didn’t know what I was getting into. As it happened, though, by the time I sold it two years ago, the company had grown from a handful of employees to a staff of sixty and we were making money hand over fist.”

“This was a problem?” she asked wryly.

“For me, it was. I couldn’t control it. The drive. I was—maybe—catching four hours’ sleep a night. Had an ulcer that didn’t want to heal. Lost a woman I really cared for because I neglected her and the relationship both. And the real bug was, my degree was in architecture but all I was doing was management. Maybe I had a talent for the money side of things, but that wasn’t the point. I hated it. I got into architecture because my dream was to build, to create, to make things. I like studs and beams and fighting with contractors, not paperwork. But because the business was going so well, it was hard for me to see it was a personal dead-end road. I was running my life by my family’s expectations—trying to be someone I’m not. And getting nothing done that really mattered to me.”

For an instant her eyes glinted with a curious light. “I know what that’s like—trying to meet family expectations that don’t fit you any better than a round peg in a square hole. But anyway, you said you sold the business...”

“Yeah. And for a while I didn’t work. I bought a house here, got a boat, did some fishing and hiking and mountain climbing. I can’t say I needed the break so much. But I needed time to be more sure of myself, sure I wouldn’t get sucked into the family expectation thing again, sure about what I really wanted to do. And when I felt I had my ducks in a row, I sent out résumés—and took the job with you.”

She hesitated. “I can’t believe I didn’t guess your background long before this. You and I always bucked heads at work. Now, that makes more sense. You’re used to taking charge. You jump in to fix things. And when you do it better than me, it gets my dander up every time.”

“If you think that our bucking heads was about a power struggle, I’m telling you no. I don’t want your job, Nik. Never did. Personally I think that edginess between us comes from an entirely different source.”

“What?”

He thought the chemistry between them caused enough sexual friction to spontaneously combust a forest fire or two. But just then, he didn’t think Nicole was real open to hearing that. “We can talk about that another time. The reason I brought up all this stuff about my background was to prod your memory. Because

I haven't told you one thing you didn't already know about me."

She stopped dead, her expression a mirror of confusion. "No, I didn't—"

"Yeah, you did. We talked about it the night of the Christmas party." Maybe until that moment, he'd never completely believed her about not remembering. But he could see her swallow, see the way her eyes darted nervously to his face. Nik just wouldn't be revealing that kind of vulnerability—or fear—if she'd recalled what happened. Slowly he said, "The others left just after midnight. I would have, too, only you and I started talking. Both of us. Not just me. You told me a bunch of personal things about yourself no different than—"

"Oh God. What'd I say?"

She'd told him no deep dark secrets. Mitch only wished she had. If he understood better what made her tick, he'd feel a lot more secure knowing how to handle this whole situation now. "You never said anything you need to worry about. I'm just trying to tell you how that night played out. I'd had a fair amount of champagne. So had you. I never planned to end up in your bed, Nik—hell, I'd have brought protection if I'd ever thought there was even a remote chance of that. We just started talking. And you'd never really talked with me before, not deep-type talk, and one kind of closeness led to another. I knew we'd been drinking, but I honestly didn't think either of us had that much. As far as I understood, we were both fully aware of making a choice."

Edgily she picked up a flat stone, skimmed it like he had. Hers

bounced six times, which she didn't even stop to appreciate. She was already looking at him again. "Mitch, it never crossed my mind to blame you. I already figured it was my fault."

Frustration clawed through his pulse. He'd wanted her to understand that he'd never been a predatory wolf in the story, preying on a vulnerable woman who'd maybe sipped a little too much champagne. But he'd never intended to cop out on responsibility or for her to heap guilt on her own shoulders either. "Nicole, listen to me. Get that idea out of your mind. It wasn't about fault. It was an unforgettable night. You were...incredible. Warm, giving, uninhibited. Wild. You went straight to my head. Champagne had nothing to do with it."

Three

Hopefully Mitch couldn't see the flush burning her cheeks in the darkness, but for that instant, Nicole couldn't have answered him if her life depended on it. Wild? Surely he had her confused with another woman. Warm, uninhibited, incredible? She had no idea who he was describing, but it couldn't possibly be her.

Her arms were already wrapped around her ribs, but she tucked them even tighter. For years she'd had her life on a clear track. She only colored between the lines. She obeyed the rules. She'd even decorated her house to express exactly the kind of woman she was—fussily neat, proper, on the formal side. She wasn't remotely related to the selfish, irresponsible teenager she'd once been. Champagne or no champagne, she just couldn't imagine throwing all that hard-won caution to the winds and

being the kind of passionate cookie Mitch was describing.

She wasn't passionate.

She wasn't even an emotional woman. Actually, there were moments she thought she was turning into a downright tedious prig—but that was way better than flying through life barreling into impulsive, disastrous mistakes the way she used to.

The tide whooshed in and foamed around her feet, seeping into her sneakers. The water was icy, yet she didn't move, fiercely willing the cold to shock her mind into remembering that darn night. Only nothing came. The night was a complete blank slate—except for the parts he'd filled in.

She stole a glance at Mitch, then quickly looked away. This was horrible. Suddenly she couldn't look at him without thinking about sex. She'd never thought of him that way, not just because he was an employee, but because he was a blond beanpole. If a guy caught her eye, he invariably had darker coloring and some meat on his bones. Mitch was about five miles tall and all of it skinny.

Only now she kept noticing that there was nothing skinny about the breadth of his shoulders. And his basket-ball-player height made her think of an athlete's rhythm and stamina. And once she thought back, he'd just never looked at her with those sky-blue eyes in a nice, innocuous, friendly way. It was always there. That gender edginess. She just never forgot for an instant that she was female, not around Mitch, and now all those little details were adding up to drive her crazy. She'd have given gold

for even fragments of memory from the night of the Christmas party, yet that corner of her mind seemed as locked as a bank vault.

"Mitch," she blurted out, "if it all happened that way, why didn't you ever say anything to me long before this?"

"Believe me, I wanted to. But everything after that started getting complicated. To begin with, I left in the morning while you were still sleeping. The last thing I wanted to do was leave you, but you'd told me there were cleaning people coming first thing in the morning to clear up after the party. And I just didn't think you'd be comfortable, people coming in, a man in your house that way...."

"I wouldn't have been," she admitted.

"And I called you later that day. But right off, you brought up business, a problem with a client we'd been having...which was fine...except that it seemed real obvious to me you were deliberately avoiding any mention of our night together."

"I wasn't deliberately avoiding anything, I swear! I honestly didn't remember."

He nodded. "So you're telling me now. But it never occurred to me that you didn't remember then. I had no reason to know that, no reason to guess that. I assumed you knew, and that your ducking any mention of it was a choice. You closed up like a clam, and I was struggling to understand why. I knew perfectly well that you always had a hyper thing about not getting personally involved with the people who worked for you—"

“Because it risks sexual harassment. Any boss is in a power position whether she wants to be or not. It just makes any personal relationship wrong—”

“Nik, I know all the laws,” he said impatiently. “And I always respected you for being so careful—but none of that applied to you and me. I’d told you about my background. I don’t need the job. Not financially or in any other sense. You have no power over me like in a regular employer /employee situation. And since we’d talked about that, I figured that wasn’t the problem. It had to be something else. The only conclusion I could draw was that our making love had upset you, and you needed some time to think about it. So I shut up, too. As I saw it, that was what you wanted. And my feeling was just...to wait. Keep working together. See how you felt as time passed. I didn’t want to push or pressure you into something you didn’t want or weren’t ready for. But...”

“But?” she echoed when he didn’t immediately finish his comment.

He stopped, with the moonlit surf behind him, making his hair looked brushed with silver and the strong, angular bones in his face appear carved in stone. Only his eyes looked liquid, and his gaze focused on her face with the intensity of a caress. “But I also thought you knew, Nik. How incredible that night was. What kind of chemistry we’d created together. To be honest, I wasn’t thinking about the risk of babies. I was thinking that you’d been scared off by another kind of risk entirely—the way we’d come together like thunder and lightning. Because I never expected

that kind of passionate explosion between us either."

Her throat went bone dry. So they were back to sex again. And not just sex, but incredible sex. How the evening had unfolded, why he'd stayed quiet later, thinking it was for her sake—she believed Mitch completely about those parts of the story. She trusted his integrity. He'd proven it a hundred times at work. Heaven knew, he could be tactful with a client, but he was the first one to leap in with sharp, blunt honesty when the going got rough. And truth to tell, she could easily imagine Mitch creating thunder and lightning as a lover. It was her. Being hot like that. Sexy like that. Nothing like he described had ever happened to her.

Possibly she'd chosen to be celibate for a blue moon, but she was no virgin. Her first forays into sexuality, though, all stemmed from the era when she'd been rebellious, reckless and painfully young. She hadn't known what she was doing, any more than the boys she'd experimented with. Whatever sensuality was in her nature...it wasn't a matter of hiding it. She always wanted to explore that with the right man. But she'd had mistakes to bury and atone for and fix, and it had taken every ounce of her time to make a new life for herself. She'd put her hormones up in a mental attic.

Or she thought she had.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, talking about this?" he asked her.

"It doesn't matter whether I'm uncomfortable or not. I needed

to know the truth." But now she could barely look at him without feeling heat climb her throat in a heart-slamming rush.

"Yeah, I agree. Knowing what happened is a critical ingredient to your deciding what you want to do next. And that's what we got together to talk about, isn't it?"

"Sex?" Tarnation. Doubtless the word slipped out because it was in block letters at the tip of her mind.

But Mitch responded with a slow teasing grin. It was obviously beyond him to be a gentleman and let the slip pass. "Hey, I'm always up for talking about sex...but I was pretty sure what you wanted to discuss was babies."

"Of course I want to talk about babies," Nicole rapidly assured him. "The baby is the only subject on my mind. Completely. Totally."

"Now, don't start getting nervous again—"

"I'm not nervous," she immediately denied...but she was. Once the blasted man had put pictures of their making love in her mind, it was harder to get them out than rousting a stubborn sliver. There were a dozen dead serious concerns troubling her, yet her thoughts kept straying down sexual fantasy roads with him playing the lead. She was appalled at herself, but even a brickload of guilt couldn't seem to dig out that sliver.

"Okay, you're not nervous," he said gently. "But, um, before you charge down the beach for another mile at the same breakneck pace...we've really hiked a long way? And you've had a tiring day. Don't you think it's about time to turn around and

head back?"

She turned around. Promptly. And because she'd mastered the fine art of proper behavior, she didn't smack him. There wasn't an ounce of sarcasm in his voice, but that was exactly why the thought of punching him was so tempting. He could get sharp with other people. With her, he used that low, whiskey-gentle voice—even when she was wrong. Hells bells, especially when she was wrong. It was just infuriating. "I was just going to suggest that we turn around."

"I'm sure you were," he agreed. "And in the meantime... we may have covered how we got in this predicament—but not what either of us wants to do about it. And I have an idea on the subject of babies I'd like you to consider."

"What?"

"The old traditional one that couples have been trying since the beginning of time when a pregnancy showed up unexpectedly—marriage."

For the first time all day she relaxed. A chuckle bubbled from her throat and emerged in a peal of laughter. Nothing was funny about her situation, nothing humorous in this whole encounter with Mitch. But her nerves had been strung so tight, and his joke just hit her as natural comic relief. "Thanks, Sir Galahad. That was sweet."

"Uh, Nik? I wasn't being 'sweet'. It was a serious of fer."

Her laughter died, but not her smile. "Come on, I know you don't mean it. We're not living in the dark ages. Nobody has to

get married anymore. Women alone are raising kids all over the place."

"So...there's no question in your mind about having this child?" he asked swiftly. "I know you said earlier that you wanted the baby. But that was also just a few short minutes after you found out you were pregnant."

She sobered quickly then. "Are you asking me whether I changed my mind, might be thinking about an abortion?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm asking."

She slugged her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "If I were sixteen, or ill, or I knew something was wrong with the baby...I don't know what I'd do," she said with careful honesty. "But my circumstances are nothing like that Maybe I wasn't expecting the news of a pregnancy at this exact moment in time...but I always wanted children. I couldn't be more at an ideal healthy age to have a baby. I can financially support one. And yes, I want him...or her. I just haven't had time to do all the thinking or planning about how I'm going to cope with things yet."

"Okay." Mitch released a pent-up sigh, as if he really hadn't been sure how she was going to answer that question. "But you're going to be trying to juggle a pregnancy and work. And then a new baby and work."

"I know that—"

"And I'm in this picture, Nik. Not just because I want to be a father—and an active, involved father. But because I know your business. There's no one else who's in an equally good position

to help you through this. I can deal with work decisions when you can't. I can make it possible for you to juggle your personal schedule any way you need it juggled."

She fell silent. Those things were undeniably true. She hadn't thought about Mitch in a role as father, or his rights as a dad—or how to make any of that work. She also hadn't meant to be so insensitive as to only be thinking of herself and the baby as only her problem.

"I'm also concerned about the side ways this could affect your work and the business. Like you said, a woman could choose to have a kid on her own today. But that's in theory, and life's never quite so nice as theory. There's bound to be buzz about your getting knocked up, getting involved with a guy who wouldn't step up. So maybe most people would be okay with it. But you've got some conservative clients. And you've worked hard to build a respectable, responsible reputation."

"I hear you. But I'm not afraid of taking any heat—"

"Nik, I'm sure you're not. And I never did give a damn what people thought. But I'm a saying a ring on your finger would make sure those problems never happened."

She shoved a hand through her hair. This was exactly how Mitch was at work. When the team started arguing—and creative people were notorious for getting their egos confused with their opinions—Mitch rarely raised his voice, just quietly, firmly, kept spilling out practical, sensible angles on a problem. A woman could actually start believing that a marriage between strangers

made sense—when she knew perfectly well it didn't

"And a ring on your finger would give the baby a name. People don't label a kid 'bastard' any more, thank God, but I still think a name matters. I can't believe your parents and family wouldn't have something to say about your having a baby out of wedlock—at least if being married were a choice."

She swallowed. Hard. Mitch couldn't know he was ripping the scab off some real old scars with that comment. For years now, she'd been trying to rebuild a relationship with her parents. The estrangement had been caused by her irresponsible teenage behavior entirely—and in their shoes, Nicole wouldn't have been any quicker to forgive. But she'd hoped that time would prove to them that she'd changed, and those hurts would eventually heal if she persisted in living a decent, respectable life. To announce an unwed pregnancy could well close those doors all over again. Because it was exactly the kind of disappointment in character and morals they were surely expecting from her.

Still. Trying to correct a wrong by doing something disastrously more wrong was never a solution. "Every problem you're pointing out is very real, but I just can't believe you mean it. We can't possibly get married, Landers! Come on, it's just crazy. We don't even know each other!"

"You've known me for months."

"That's not the same kind of knowing! For Pete's sake, we can't even get through a staff meeting without bickering and friction most of the time."

“It never occurred to you that there might be an interesting reason we always caused so much friction together?”

She halted in her tracks. “What are you trying to say? That sexual chemistry caused that friction?”

“Yeah, I do. Now. Originally I just thought we had a little personality clash...but the night of the Christmas party damn well forced me to notice there was evidence in another direction entirely. I think we had liquid oxygen between us all along. We just didn’t know it until someone lit a match.”

Well, the damn man flustered her all over again. She couldn’t deny what she couldn’t remember. “Chemistry or no chemistry...you just can’t be serious, Mitch. Knights don’t charge in to rescue ladies in trouble any more. I’m not in trouble. Neither are you. Not only do neither of us have to get married, but in a thousand years I can’t imagine your wanting to get hooked up with me.”

“No?”

“No,” she sputtered. “Of course not. I mean, look at us. Your office looks like a marine bivouac, sports stuff and guy-type messes all over the place. I’m a neatnik, an order lover. You think I don’t know the whole staff thinks I’m prissy? A pain-in-the-behind stickler for the rules? You couldn’t possibly want to be married to me. We’d drive each other crazy in half a day—assuming we lasted that long.”

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